Max Beerbohm, the Irrepressible

A SURVEY. Fifty-one cartoons by Max Beerbohm. Doubleday, Page & Co.

THERE was once an actor who found his real pleasure not in the dramatic profession but in his work as a landscape painter. He was never so happy as when messing in his beloved paints, though he was not at all a bad actor. But of him the actors said: "He's really a first rate painter," and the painters said: "As an actor he ranks at the head of his profession."

Mr. Max Beerbohm has a dual facility with his pen and his pencil, yet the gods have so favored him that when he draws a cartoon nobody feels moved to ask if the present company has ever read his sparkling essays; and when he writes another of his uncompromising trivialities nobody talks about his drawings. This, we submit, is pretty great favor of his gods, and we suspect that they could not hold over like that through and beyond a quarter century if they were not the gods of Victorian times. For these gods, incredible as the idea may seem to the præter-past Victorian world, are the last set of gods in existence who had any secure basis—or bases—to stand on. Those contemporaries who have turned away, with calculated bitterness, from the Victorian gods would be the last to pretend that they worship any gods at all save the invariably eternal essence of divinity which inspires their own individuality. They are as frank about it as Martin Luther; heaven help them they can no other. They say: "Standards are a superstition; we are free men above paying homage to anything which we do not know about because we ourselves did not make it; we walk in the cold light of negation. We follow our spirits' guidance, and you might as well be content—we are."

The ancient set of things taken for granted because all intelligent persons recogrized their soundness included the assertion that you cannot prove a negative. This thesis naturally includes (as the greater includes the less) the reality that you cannot prove even that a general negation of all things is futile. Therefore the saving remnant of the world's intelligence is waiting particularly for something positive, definite and capable of transmitting itself, to issue from the nebula of dissent, contradiction and scornful detachment which fills the atmosphere of all the arts, at present. The attitude of the twentieth century after the experiences of its first twenty years is perfectly expressed in Max's cartoon, included in this handsomely made book of drawings, called "The Future as Beheld by the Twentieth Century." The Twentieth Century is represented by a somewhat "haggard and lank young man" fixing his eyes through emptiness of space upon a large interrogation point in relief against a dark curtain of cloud. Other drawings in the series show the Eighteenth Century and the Nineteenth Century, each in a typical figure, imagining the next century in the form of itself much amplified. The Twentieth Century simply stands and stares, very like a mythological personage well known in that dark Victorian backward called Wilkins Micawber, whose principle in life was to wait for something to turn up.

These three figures aptly represent states of mind, but Max is just as good at catching postures of the body, in individuals, and making their intellectual characteristics shine through and illuminate their characteristic attitudes. His drawing of Mr. Balfour, with his cartoonist's unerring instinct for exaggerating physical tendencies, is a marvelous portrait of that unperturbed yet always intelligently interested soul. "In a world comparatively at peace, now [remarks Max] Mr. Balfour tackles Benedetto Croce," and one marvels at the figure of that wonderful old gentleman holding a precious little edition of his author conveniently before his eyes and permitting his magnificently lumbering body to fill the picture with a sense of a sort of ammunition dump of physical expanse whose interest is concentrated in the small head in which intent, if almost invisible, eyes are drawing something from the page which lights up his placid face. "Enfin Seuls!" is the title of this portrait; the sense of the precious solitude of these two, Benedetto and Arthur, is unmistakable. The fighting has ceased; even the Washington conference is out of the way, and now the scholar is able to forget everything but the intellectual bath. Never was Mr. Balfour's special idiosyncrasy of complete absorption in the work (or play or rest) of the moment better indicated.

The delicacy of Max's art is its essence and the very lightness of line which distinguishes all these drawings helps their quality, but makes their reproduction somewhat difficult, even in a well printed book; they are incapable of any satisfactory reproduction on a newspaper page. The whole series was shown in the Leicester Galleries in London and made as much sensation as might have been expected. Such cartoons as that of the King of Spain, of Mr. Lloyd George, of President Wilson, of the former Kaiser, of Col Repington, of Winston Churchill (with the ghost of Lord Randolph in the background), of Sir Oliver Lodge and Sir E. Ray Lankester, of Bernard Shaw and Georg Brandes, or of Henry James—are delicate problems in psychology which assume a certain background of ideas in the observer's mind—again a Victorian trick! The cartoon of John Bull and Sir Edward Carson is of so vast a suggestion that it can be studied repeatedly with recurrent delight. Says John Bull: "I wonder if you quite realize how utterly sick and tired of you I am!" And Sir Edward answers: "I wonder if you quite realize how utterly sick and tired I am of meself!" The exaggerated contrast of the two figures is not more striking than the exaggerated facial expressions of these two figures, each overflowing with repressed power, each facing the other with enormous sincerity.

The cartoons of Gordon Craig and of Augustus John and "William, first Baron Leverhulme, setting out on a long, painful and entirely unpremeditated journey down the ages" (with his head cut squarely out of the picture), are beautiful tributes to contemporary artistic worth. The drawing of "A Captain of Industry declaring that the desire of the manual workers to be paid exorbitant wages for doing the least possible amount of work is a sure sign that they have lost their faith in a future life," taken in conjunction with that of "President Wilson Addressing Congress—1913"—is a vivid expressions of a certain sort of bond which links a certain sort of Englishman with a certain sort of American. The cartoons of the "King of Spain," of "Sir Philip Sassoon in the House of Commons—1913," of Mr. Joseph Conrad and of the mutual admiration of M. Paderewski and Signor d'Annunzio are the apotheosis of cartooning; Max has never done anything better, not even in that beautiful book of drawings published some twenty years ago in which one recalls the Rossetti group, Mr. Rudyard Kipling, Mr. George Morse (even then!) and "Lord Tennyson Reading His Poems to His Sovereign." And he did it twenty years before Mr. Lytton Strachey did his trick. And now Max portrays Mr. Lytton Strachey "trying to see with Lord Melbourne's eyes"!

To this precious and desirable collection of cartoons Max prefixes an "Epistle Dedicatory" to Britannia, in which he thanks that great lady for her surprising kindness and indulgence to himself. He reminds her that the satirist instinctively "laughs at what is very strong; the weaker things he derides with less gusto or not at all." Therefore Max recalls that until very recent years the cant was very strong, indeed, a dominant factor; therefore he inclined "to look for the weak points that all strength has, and to point them rudely out." And now that he finds "Labour" (which he spells with a "u" in spite of the waste of labor in writing the word) is very strong; consequently he makes fun of Britannia's "new Baal," as he calls it. It is proper to say that he makes fun of it very intelligently and effectively. The type of British "Labour" which he exemplifies in his cartoons is, it would seem, a bit more offensive than most of the excessive apostles of labor in our own happy country. He does not spare it; why should he? He attacks overbearing strength wherever he finds it, and, very likely, he may make labor squirm.

The South Seas Again

THE ISLE OF VANISHING MEN. By W. F. ALDER. The Century Company.

TO the rapidly growing number of men who are following in the footsteps of the author of "Moby Dick" and of the artist Gaugin and making populous the South Sea Islands must be added the name of the writer of "The Isle of Vanishing Men." In the face of official warning from the civil representative of Holland in that part of the world, Mr. Alder went to New Guinea—the place name of his more picturesquely titled island, camped among the natives for a while and returned to civilization to tell his tale and illustrate it with many photographs taken on the spot.

Mr. Alder is no moralist, no preacher against the white man and his invasion of new countries, no upholder of imperialism or any other "ism." He is simply an adventurous traveller who makes few bones of hardships endured and writes a plain, unvarnished narrative of what he saw while living among the Kia Kias.

This is a race of "vanishing men," not from the incursions of the whites but from their custom of eating human flesh, a habit frowned on by the Dutch representative in the island but which is practiced extensively enough to have human heads and skulls as trophies in every household. Mr. Alder gives one photograph of a mother telling her child the stories of the skulls laid on the earth in front of them, much as in our world a mother might describe souvenirs taken on our own battlefields and preserved in a family as a part of its military traditions.

He tells many tales of these people, their daily customs of life, their dull slothfulness, the vanity of the men and women which leads them to painful inflictions of their bodies to "beautify" them, according to the Kia Kia ideals of adornment. He tells how the women incite the men to go on the human warpath and of the feasts that ensue, one of the Kia Kias informing Mr. Alder that nothing is quite so good to eat as "the left shoulderbone of a young girl."

It is a very dispiriting picture and a repellent one, but it is marked with the air of undeniable truth that makes one wonder over some of the panegyrics written about these people. He describes in detail his efforts to recover the bones of a Swiss scientist who had "disappeared" a short while before he visited New Guinea, a plan that was frustrated, as he believed, by the evident fears of the older men of the tribe that the delivery of the bones would be taken as evidence of guilt and some unusual punishment would follow. In its simplicity, evidences of unadorned truth and of personal observation of the aborigine at home, this text of Mr. Alder's bears a close relation to the journal of Cabe Da Vaca.